

FOOD ALLERGY

What is food allergy?

Food allergy is one of the five most common allergies or hypersensitivities known to affect dogs. Most people know someone who is allergic to certain foods, such as strawberries or nuts. It is only recently that food allergies have become recognized in dogs. The signs are usually itchy skin, recurrent ear infections or an upset stomach. Other more subtle changes can also occur including hyperactivity, weight loss, lack of energy and even aggression.

What are the signs of food allergy? My dog just seems to itch and occasionally has diarrhea.

Many dogs will occasionally react to something they ate. This may be sensitivity to a particular type of food. The symptoms are often not a true allergy, just mild gastrointestinal upset. Once you associate the upset with a particular food and avoid it, the problem is usually solved.

Food allergy is different. Antibodies are produced against some part of the food, usually a protein. In a pet with food allergy, the immune system overreacts and produces antibodies to substances that it should normally tolerate. This excessive response is termed an allergic reaction. Most pets with food allergies have itchy skin or recurrent ear problems rather than vomiting or diarrhea.

Are some ingredients more likely to cause allergies than others?

The most common food allergies in dogs are proteins from dairy products, beef, lamb or gluten (from wheat). Each time a pet eats food containing these substances, the antibodies react and symptoms such as itching, vomiting or diarrhea occur.

Are these the only food constituents likely to cause food hypersensitivity?

No, virtually any food or ingredient can produce an allergy. Proteins are the most common cause but other substances and additives can also be responsible.

How is the condition diagnosed?

Feeding an elimination diet is the only means of determining the presence of a food allergy. This is a hypoallergenic diet which contains none of the ingredients of the previous diet. Elimination diet trials have to be fed for a minimum of 8 to 12 weeks.

The elimination diet may be either

- 1) A special commercial diet that has hydrolyzed protein in it – enzymes are used to break the protein molecule up into such small particles that they can't stimulate an allergic reaction e.g. Hills Z/d
- 2) Finding a source of protein your pet has never eaten before and is free of additives (E.g. kangaroo, rabbit, duck, fish) and feeding this with rice or boiled potato (not pasta in-case a wheat allergy exists)

No other food sources (treats, milk, bones, eggs) or vitamin /mineral supplements should be fed during the entire elimination trial – this includes flavored heartworm prevention tablets (use plain tablets or a topical spot-on instead)

The level of itchiness should start to reduce in 3-4 weeks but the diet must be fed for 8-10 weeks. The diagnosis is then confirmed by the return of itchiness when the old diet is re-introduced.

Although an elimination trial takes a lot of effort and will power on behalf of all family members it is well worth the effort as if you do have a pet with a food allergy you can, by controlling their diet, improve the quality of their life.

How is the condition treated?

Once the offending food substance has been identified, a diet is chosen that does not contain these particular substances. Today there are a number of commercially available, palatable, hypoallergenic diets on which the dog can be fed for the rest of his life. E.g. Prescription Diet z/d has special hydrolyzed proteins and is an excellent choice for pets with food allergy.

Occasionally commercial diets containing the right constituents may not be available or your pet will not eat them. If this occurs, you may have to prepare a home cooked diet.

Can the problem be cured?

The only cure is avoidance. Some pets will require medication during severe episodes but most pets can be successfully treated with a hypoallergenic diet.

Is it likely that my dog could develop other food allergies?

It is not uncommon for dogs that have developed an allergy to one particular food to develop other food-related allergies. Additionally, most dogs with food allergies are also allergic to fleas, pollens etc.

If you think your pet may have a food allergy, feel free to talk with our staff. We can help both you and your pet resume a healthier, “itch-free” life!